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Espionage

LONDON AP - William James Owen Laborite member of Parliament, was arrested Thursday on charges of espionage and will be arraigned Friday, police reported.

A police announcement did not indicate for what country or agency OWEN was accused of spying. It said only that he was being charged under the section of the Official Secrets Act dealing with the passing of information prejudicial to the security of the state.

Owen has been a member of parliament for the Morpeth district in northeast England since 1964.

There was no violation of parliamentary privilege in Owen's arrest. Members are protected from libel suits arising from their statements in Parliament but they may be arrested on criminal charges like any other citizen.

Owen, a coal miner's son, was born Feb. 18, 1901. He was educated at the London Labor College. He is married, with one son and a daughter.

He has long been a leader of the British cooperative movement and has been president of the South Suburban Cooperative Society since 1950. He was a member of the National Coal Board, which runs Britain's state-owned coal industry, from 1948 to 1950.

Owen never held any government office or national post within the Labor party organization. In the House of Commons he was a backbencher.

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Comment. First word. CSDO informed.

These comments represent the initial and tentative reaction of the CIA to the current intelligence.

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Around the World**British Parliamentarian
Charged With Espionage**

LONDON—William James Owen, a Laborite member of the British Parliament for 15 years and a leader of the Cooperative Movement, was arrested yesterday on charges of spying for a foreign power.

The Scotland Yard announcement did not identify the foreign power, but other sources said it was not the Soviet Union.

Owen, 68, a former coal miner, was not identified with leftist groups in Parliament. He never held any government office or national post in the Labor Party. He has been a parliamentary backbencher representing the northeast English constituency of Morpeth since 1954.

Scotland Yard said Owen was charged under the section of the Official Secrets Act dealing with the passing of information prejudicial to the security of the state. Parliamentarians are subject to criminal prosecution in Britain.

24 JAN 1970

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Alfred Friendly

Britain's Pretrial Publicity Ban Obscures Facts in Spy Case

LONDON—The much-heralded British achievement of protecting a defendant in a criminal case from publicity that might prejudice his future trial turns out to be exacting a not inconsiderable price: Public ignorance, extended over a lengthy period, about public affairs.

The question of how to resolve the balance so important in a democratic society between the public's need of information and the need of the accused for an unbiased jury continues to plague bar and press and citizenry in general in the United States.

The British resolved it, or at least decided it, by plumping whole hog for the defendant.

The last loophole in guaranteeing the accused a totally uncontaminated jury was closed in 1967 by a law barring publication of committal (arraignment) hearings in which the government's accusations are laid out, in more or less detail.

Its effect, coupled with that of earlier legislation commanding press silence on almost everything but the fact of the arrest itself, means that in most cases an impenetrable curtain is drawn over any real knowledge until the trial itself.

The British police usually do not say even that a suspect is being sought or has been arrested, and resort instead to such euphemisms as "a man is helping police in their enquiries."

THE ARREST on Jan. 15 of William Owen, a Labor member of Parliament, and his jailing on charges of disclosing secret information to an enemy is a case in point on the relative gain and loss from the strict legislation.

Owen's rights to a super-sanitary trial are being protected to the utmost.

The announced charge is confined to a citation in a passage of the National Secrets Act that he is accused of violating on various dates between Aug. 26, 1961, and December, 1969. Police are disclosing nothing more known.

and even if they did, the press could not publish it on penalty of contempt of court.

Had Owen felt, however, that publication of what transpired at his initial court appearances, where he was refused bail and remanded to jail, would have been to his benefit, he could have invoked another provision of the law, designed for the defendant's protection, and waived the injunction of nonpublication. In any event, he did not.

The result is to leave the British public without information on what may or may not be a grave security breach committed over an eight-year period.

By a curious paradox, Americans know slightly more of the circumstances than the British, because certain information and deductions forbidden to be published in Britain can be printed, and have been, across the Atlantic in journals that are unlikely to be seen by a prospective juror in London.

THE BRITISH will not know the facts, or even the detailed allegations, in the Owen case for weeks or perhaps months—possibly never.

Owen will appear again in court next Tuesday. Once again he will probably not waive the rule of nonpublication of what transpires. Sometime thereafter, possibly not until some months have passed, will his case come to trial. Then, and then only, will the British public learn what it is all about.

Yet possibly not even then. For, if at some point before trial the government drops the charges, or determines to prosecute only some minor or ancillary ones, the public will still remain in the dark about the original and more serious allegations.

So, also, if Owen decides to plead guilty and the accusations against him are presented only on paper to the judge, out of the attending reporters' sight, the facts can continue to remain unknown.

THE QUESTION all this raises in the mind of an American reporter here is whether his own countrymen would, or should, be as willing to forgo important information about the state of the country's security as the British seem to be.

But even the British may be having second thoughts about the price in ignorance they are paying for the near-perfect guarantees they have adopted to prevent prejudicial publicity.

In a recent editorial anxiously discussing the implications of official silence in the Owen case, the London Times seemed to be entertaining such doubts. It wrote:

"These accusations concern . . . the security of the country, the integrity of Parliament and perhaps our relations with an unnamed power. The public must have proper information about such matters, and in the last resort it is the duty of government to satisfy public opinion."